ARGUING WITH GOD
Jonah 4: 1-11
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Jonah is everyman/everywoman. Jonah has two contrary impulses inside himself: the impulse of faith, and the impulse to arrange all reality in a way which conforms to his own personel preferences. Jonah is you and me; a believer who wants to be faithful but who becomes a little cranky when his religion inconveniences him. Jonah looks uncomfortably familiar, a good-hearted soul who prefers his own kind; an average person who organizes the world out there into "us and them." Jonah believes in God but he can't remember the clause in the contract which gave God the right to decide who he, Jonah, had to like, let alone love. Jonah's world was and is, neatly compartmentalized: everybody has a place, a role, a God-ordained part to play in the scheme of things. If each would just cooperate...if God would just remember that Assyrians are not Babylonians, and Jews aren't Egyptians, and Africans aren't Anglo-Saxons.

It is one of the most underated short stories in the world. All most of us recall of it at first blush is the business about the whale and that's too bad because the big fish is quite incidental to the story, a literary device only.

The author is an unknown writer who seems to know a lot about the fourth century B.C. For one reason or another he sets his story in an historical context four hundred or so years before. All that proves is that ancient Jews, like us, prefered their prophets from a perspective of several hundred years.

The story is old. The fourth century B.C. was a most distressing time for Israel. A succession of foreign powers had conquered and ruled the land: Persians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Greeks. Jewish patience was wearing very thin. The rabbis taught that purity of religion and custom would strengthen the nation and please God. And so there was a great rennaisance of ritual and piety, of religious law and ceremony. It was also a time of strong patriotism which always bordered on parochialism. The better and purer they felt, the worse their neighbors looked. It is not an uncommon dynamic. A story about a prophet of Israel called by God to go to the capital city of the worst of the Gentiles, was every bit as controversial, disturbing and notorious as a Presbyterian preacher traveling to Tehran during the hostage crisis last Christmas.

God told Jonah to go to Ninevah, capital of Assyria, with a big-city reputation for vice and sin, to warn the Ninevites that unless they cleaned up their act they were headed for a disaster. Jonah did not think much of the assignment. It's not that he minded being a p ophet of doom. His problem was deeper. He didn't like Assyrians. He was offended by the thought that God did.

So he boarded the next ship for Tarshish, a port on the Southwest coast of Spain, on the outer edge of the world, the furthest point to which he could sail.

Not long after the ship set sail, however, a violent storm descended. Jonah acknowledged that he was probably responsible and convinced the reluctant sailors to throw him overboard. They did, but a large fish saved Jonah from drowning by swallowing him whole.

The great fish, which turns up in literature over and over again as a mystical symbol for God's pcwer and providence, cooperates by delivering Jonah to dry ground. Now God called him again. Jonah prudently decides to obey, goes to Ninevah, warns the people, and then sits back to enjoy the show. Finally, they are going to get what they have coming. Ever do that? Ever say - "do that one more time and you'll

be sorry," and then wait, with a touch of relish, of gleeful righteousness, anticipation, for the offense to be repeated?

The Ninevites, however, are the spoilers. They got the message. They repented. From the king on down everyone in Nineveh put on sackcloth and ashes. Jonah had been a smash! A howling success.

Let's listen in on the story - Jonah 3:10 - 4:11

> When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it.
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> But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, "I pray thee, Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil. Therefore now, O Lord, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?" Then Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.
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> And the Lord God appointed a plant, and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm which attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a sultry east wind, and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah so that he was faint; and he asked that he might die, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

That's a gem of a story. In fact, it is a very important story. In fact, may I suggest that if the human family is to make it through the first chapter of the Nuclear Age, something like this story will have to reclaim center stage?

The story of humanity, after all, is the story of tribalism. It is one of our deepest instincts, and certainly one of our most destructive. There seems to be something inherently in our character which leads us to conclude, as soon as we develop a sense of community, that people outside our community are expendable. We may philosophize about the one family of humanity, but the fact of the matter is that the separate branches of the family notoriously have enjoyed and exploited their separateness. The oneness of the race has been perceived as foolishness, as a threat and recently as a Community plot. The opposite, this primal propensity to accentuate and celebrate separateness has spawned the sad story of parochialism, provincialism, mindless patriotism. It has given birth to the tragedy of apartheid, the sin of slavery: it is the cousin of racism; its end product is a creature in a white sheet burning crosses, or the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Here - 400 B.C. - in the seed bed of western civilization; here in the root system of what we call Judeo-Christian culture - is another word, however. Here is a Jewish story with the audacity to assert that Assyrians are as important as Jews. Here is the most radical proposal in all of History: namely that God loves all people: he is equally interested in all nations.

The theological name for that political and sociological assertion is grace. It means that God loves people in a way that is fundamentally different from the way we love people. It means that God isn't keeping score by the same rules we are using.

The human tendency, as with sociological exclusiveness calling itself patriotism, is to limit God's love and call it orthodoxy. Abraham Lincoln mused about it and, in his last years, seems to have struggled with it. Both sides in the Civil War, he observed, claimed God as an ally. Both North and South claimed God's justice and righteousness. It is our nature apparently to make God our accomplice.

One of the most difficult assignments in the world, frankly, is to love someone you don't like. It is neither simple, nor easy to step away from prejudice which has been taught, nurtured across generations and instilled in young minds. The deepest scars in Northern Ireland are in the minds of young Catholic and Protestant boys and girls who subsist on a daily diet of sectarian hatred. And the most serious disservice we do to our own children is to inflict on them our own prejudices of race, class, nation. History doesn't need any more of it. Jonah, is a reminder, that the task of faith today, as always, is to love the world as God loves the world. It is a blunt rejoinder to sectarianism. It is the word of God that the process of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ is the process of opening our arms and hearts to love other people - people we don't like, people we don't trust, people who appear to be our enemies.

Jonah couldn't deal with the fact that God liked Assyrians. We read that marvelous little prayer after God changed his mind and spared Nineveh which says, in effect: "I knew it! I knew it all along! When it came right down to it, I knew you'd spare them!" Jonah's argument with God was about his taste in friends on the surface. Beneath the surface, however, it is an argument about grace.

It is an argument as old as this story, and as contemporary as John Updike's most recent novel. One modern scholar frames it this way:

> "The fundamental problem humans have with God is not that he is cruel or vengeful, but that he is gracious. It is not so much his treatment of us that grates, but his generosity toward others.... Who among us has not been offended by a gracious God who pays full wage to one hour workers, who sends sun and rain on the just and unjust, and who gives parties to prodigals."
> (Fred B. Craddock, Proclamation 2, Series B,p.26)

We do have a bit of trouble with it. We do wonder why God seems so oblivious to our good work, our efforts to be good people. How can he love us all regardless of our track record. Karl Barth put it as simply as it can be put:

> "We dislike hearing that we are saved by grace...We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live from his goodness alone..." (Deliverance to the Captives, p. 46)

Perhaps it is a final assault on our ego. Perhaps, I have concluded, the pride

which is our sin, must finally confront the simple fact that God loves us because he is God. I was captivated by an incident in the memoirs of William Sloane Coffin, Jr., "Once to Every Man," in which he discussed his intellectual and theological struggles while a student at Yale. I recalled the passage because all of us have been in the situation Coffin describes. A friend had been killed in an automobile accident and Coffin was sitting in the college chapel at his funeral:

> "I was filled with angry thoughts. My friend's death seemed to be one more bit of evidence to prove the fatuousness of believing in an all-powerful all-loving God when, as any sensitive person could see, the entire surface of the earth was soaked with the tears and blood of the innocent. Maliciously I had noted outside that the priest had a typically soft face over his hard collar. Now as he started down the aisle toward the altar he began to intone unctuously Job's famous words: 'The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' From the aisle seat where I was sitting I could have stuck out my foot and tripped him up, and might easily have done so, had my attention not been arrested by a still, small voice, as it were, asking, 'Coffin, what part of that sentence are you objecting to?' Naturally I thought it was the second part, 'the Lord hath taken away.' spoken all too facilely by the priest. But suddenly I realized it was the first. Suddenly I caught the full impact of 'The Lord gave': the world very simply is not ours, at best we're guests. It was not an understanding I relished nor one, certainly, to clear up all my objections to my friend's death. But as I sat quietly now at his funeral, I realized that it was probably the understanding against which all the spears of human pride had to be hurled and shattered."

Jonah argued with God. He argued because he couldn't understand how God could care about Assyrians. He argued, in fact he sulked and pouted when confronted by this idea of God's grace. We know the script. We have played the role. We have asked the same questions.

The grace in the story feels better from the point of view of the Ninevites. Each of us lives there on occasion. God's love leaps over all the barriers we build around ourselves to reclaim us as his own. But the Gospel for me in this story is that in spite of the argument, in spite of the sulking and pouting, the self-righteousness and paralyzing self-pity, God never gave up on Jonah.

The call was relentless. The slow boat to Tarshish wasn't slow enough. Even in the sea - in the fish - God's pursuing, tracking love is gaining on his child.

What do you make of it? Where is God seeking you, calling you, finding you? Some are blessed with clarity, with a voice in the dark, as it were. But God pursues, may I be so bold as to suggest, in the protracted pull, the pang of conscience, the guilt sometimes, the life-long process of caring and learning to love, the feeling of uncomfortable responsibility at the picture of the starving child, the unaccountable impulse to do something you ordinarily would not think of doing?

The call of God, his people have always discovered, is frequently to do something they didn't want to do. The response to God's call is, more often than not, an argument, sulking, anger sometimes, occasionally a little negotiation.

The bad news is that God will not give up on us. Of course, that happens, also, to be the good news. AMEN.